

VZCZCXRO5759
RR RUEHAG RUEHDF RUEHIK RUEHLZ
DE RUEHUP #0718/01 0971356
ZNR UUUUU ZZH
R 071356Z APR 06
FM AMEMBASSY BUDAPEST
TO RUEHC/SECSTATE WASHDC 8961
INFO RUCNMEM/EU MEMBER STATES

UNCLAS SECTION 01 OF 04 BUDAPEST 000718

SIPDIS

SENSITIVE
SIPDIS

DEPT FOR EUR/NCE

E.O. 12958: N/A
TAGS: [PGOV](#) [PINR](#) [KDEM](#) [SOCI](#) [HU](#)
SUBJECT: HUNGARY'S ELECTIONS: DEBRECEN SNAPSHOT
(C-RE6-00145)

REF: STATE 22644

Summary

[1](#)1. (SBU) Conversations in Debrecen April 4 with governing MSZP, junior governing coalition SZDSZ, opposition FIDESZ, and a journalist suggested strongly that FIDESZ can be expected to sweep Hajdu-Bihar (eastern Hungary) County's nine individual mandate seats and turn in an equally strong party list showing. Behind FIDESZ's likely success is:

- the continuing popularity of Debrecen's FIDESZ Mayor Lajos Kosa;
- a well-functioning FIDESZ county party apparatus;
- worry about the future of the region's economy, which is seen to be the responsibility of the central (MSZP/SZDSZ) government.

Background

[1](#)2. (U) Debrecen is the county seat of Hajdu-Bihar County and Hungary's second largest city at about 200 thousand inhabitants. It is home to the Lajos Kossuth Scientific University, where about 26 thousand students are currently enrolled. Although unemployment in Debrecen, at about five percent, is below the national average, joblessness countywide is estimated at 8.65 percent. The county borders Romania, and that country's improving economic performance is viewed by Hajdu-Bihar residents with a measure of trepidation. A four-lane highway, the M3, that would connect Debrecen with Budapest, is slated for completion by the end of the year (it currently extends from Budapest to Miskolc). It is hoped locally that the M3 will boost Debrecen's economy.

[1](#)3. (U) Hajdu-Bihar County is an opposition party (FIDESZ) stronghold. In the 2002 elections, FIDESZ candidates swept all nine of the county's individual mandate seats, and won almost 48 percent of the party list vote. The governing MSZP finished second with about 40 percent, while its junior coalition partner SZDSZ polled only 3.76 percent; surprisingly low for a county that features a prominent university. Voter participation in 2002 was also somewhat below the national average at just under 66 percent.

FIDESZ Stronghold, But
One MSZP Candidate May Win

[1](#)4. (U) The lone MSZP candidate with an outside chance to end FIDESZ's monopoly on power in the county is veteran

politician Katalin Levai Juhasz. Levai --age 51-- is currently President of the County Assembly and has been a member of Parliament since 1994. She is a member of the MSZP's National Presidium. In 2002, she lost an individual mandate race to FIDESZ candidate Janos Halasz. Halasz garnered 55 percent of the vote to Levai's 44. This time around, Levai is fighting an uphill battle against FIDESZ candidate Laszlo Taso. Taso is the Mayor of Nyiradony, northeast of Debrecen near the Szabolc-Szatmar-Bereg county line, and Q been a Member of Parliament since 2004.

15. (SBU) In an April 4 meeting in her spacious County Assembly office, Levai described the chief campaign issues as "jobs, decent salaries, and reasonable pensions" for the county's many retirees. Her campaign against Taso to date had been "bitter, emotional." The atmosphere, especially in the county's smaller towns, had become so freighted that "some are afraid to voice their opinions." As an illustration, Levai mentioned a recent incident in the town of Fullep. The town's Greek-Catholic priest on March 19 had enjoined his parishioners to vote for FIDESZ. Some, presumably MSZP members, in the congregation were so outraged they contacted Levai, who in turn wrote a letter to the bishop, from whom she extracted an apology. But the behavior continues, she said. The county's Roman Catholic hierarchy has behaved differently. It has sent letters to all of the local priests urging that they remain out of the election campaign. The county's Calvinists for their part have urged their parishioners to vote, but have not overtly backed any one party.

16. (SBU) Levai alleged that the county FIDESZ organization had recruited "Transylvanian Hungarians" to deface or tear down MSZP posters. Also on the prowl were "Transylvanian

BUDAPEST 00000718 002 OF 004

street preachers" who are, Levai alleged, more active in politics than their Hungarian brethren. The activities of these groups and those associated with her FIDESZ opponent Taso had forced her to file numerous official complaints to the electoral commission; the largest number in the county, Levai said. Taso's FIDESZ team harasses Levai when she attempts to campaign in Nyiradony, she alleged.

17. (SBU) Harassment aside, Levai described the race as of April 4 as "very close." Six months ago, Taso had enjoyed a twenty percent lead, but Levai claimed she had whittled that to "four or five percent." FIDESZ's county organization was worried enough that it had brought Party President Viktor Orban to Debrecen more frequently than it had originally planned. Still, Levai was not confident that the few day remaining until the April 9, first round of the elections would suffice to allow her to close the gap. She hoped that recent appearances by MSZP Prime Minister Gyurcsany would aid her efforts. Gyurcsany, she said, had recently appeared before ten thousand supporters in a local stadium. She described him as "believable and dynamic," and much more credible than the party he represents (a telling comment, when coming from a longterm MSZP member like Levai).

18. (SBU) Levai described her race as key to breaking the FIDESZ stranglehold on power in the county. She traced FIDESZ's dominance to Debrecen's FIDESZ Mayor Lajos Kosa. "Everyone in the county comes to Debrecen for shopping," she said, and can see the results of his work at first hand. Among his accomplishments, she cited the city's central square, which he had "revitalized," and Kosa's success in turning the county's airport into a burgeoning regional hub. Kosa, Levai said, was "a smart mayor, a good mayor," and she was certain he would be re-elected.

SZDSZ A Very Distant
Third Here

¶9. (SBU) SZDSZ County Assembly Faction Head Istvan Gadus April 4 gamely described his party as "the third largest in the county," but neglected to mention by how far it was trailing the county, and country's, top two parties. SZDSZ, said Gadus, had only three deputies in the county assembly, and he expected little change in his party's fortunes, given that Debrecen was FIDESZ's "showcase city" and the county a FIDESZ stronghold.

¶10. (SBU) Although Gadus had been in politics for sixteen years and was a founding member of the party, this was his first bid for a seat in Parliament. Gadus is balloting against Debrecen Mayor Lajos Kosa, who is assured victory. His MSZP opponent is a rather colorless professor of the local agricultural university, who is expected to fare poorly against Kosa as well. Gadus noted that the mayor of Debrecen until 1998 had been a member of SZDSZ and it is time, he said, "to take on (incumbent FIDESZ Mayor) Kosa." Gadus, while acknowledging that Kosa, was genuinely popular in the county, alleged that the Mayor's office uses perquisites, like a city newspaper distributed free-of-charge to burnish its image. As do SZDSZ national politicians, Gadus cited county studies allegedly showing that 14 percent of the local electorate were closet "liberals." The local university had become the focal point of SZDSZ's efforts to recruit, and it had been helped in its efforts by the GOH's SZDSZ minister of education who had, Gadus said, granted HUF 30 - 40 billion to the university during his tenure.

¶11. (SBU) A further group of "liberals," Gadus pegged their number at 10 - 12 percent of the MSZP vote, support the MSZP. SZDSZ's strategy in the county was to portray itself as the only real opposition to FIDESZ in a bid to siphon away those voters. Gadus cited "genuine differences" between his party and the MSZP. Debrecen's SZDSZ was openly campaigning for a smaller state administration, although it was aware that government jobs were often the only source of employment in some of Hajdu-Bihar County's villages. For the rest of its campaign, Debrecen SZDSZ was taking its clues from SZDSZ's national platform: privatized health care, lower taxes, and a rational social safety net.

¶12. (SBU) SZDSZ's coalition with the MSZP had hurt his party, Gadus thought. The ideal election outcome from his point of view would be to have the MSZP's Gyurcsany in power and SZDSZ in opposition. Gadus was sanguine about the eleventh-hour decision of Minister of Economics and Gyurcsany confidante Koka to join SZDSZ. He termed Koka the "perfect embodiment of what SZDSZ stands for." (Koka) is "beginning to realize that

BUDAPEST 00000718 003 OF 004

governing is about more attending ceremonial openings and closings," he said somewhat patronizingly. Koka had been to Debrecen five times since the campaign had begun. "The first time he came on his helicopter," Gadus said, cringing, and agreed that the politics of envy was still very much alive and well in Hungary. Gadus added parenthetically that a Gyurcsany win would, among other things, be a "big step" in transcending that syndrome.

¶13. (SBU) Gadus hoped that in the aftermath of this election some thought would be given to election reform. He criticized in particular the complicated system of tabulating votes, the campaign silence period, and the current practice of having public opinion sampling firms associated with one or another party. Also on his radar was campaign finance. The two major parties had spent "exorbitant sums" on their campaigns, and money was pushing parties like his own to the margins.

Journalist Sees
Continued FIDESZ
Dominance

¶14. (SBU) Local Hungarian Radio correspondent Kornelia Bene was convinced April 4 that FIDESZ would repeat its 2002 performance in Hajdu-Bihar County. She credited FIDESZ Mayor Kosa for the party's continuing invincibility. In Debrecen, people are "living better" and the Mayor gets the credit. Also working in Kosa's favor is his photogenic family, especially his three children, which his campaign has made liberal use of. The local FIDESZ strategy of taking credit for any positive developments, while laying negative phenomena at the feet of the MSZP-led central government continued to pay dividends. Also important was FIDESZ's superior county party organization. Bene noted that the party had dispatched fourteen buses of FIDESZ supporters and a car caravan to the party's April 2 rally in Budapest. In all, she estimated, as many as four thousand Debrecenites may have attended the event.

¶15. (SBU) Bene thought it unlikely that Levai would win her race against Taso, but she conceded that the MSZP candidate had an outside chance. Making her the possible exception, she said, was Levai's access to "administrative resources" as President of the County Assembly. Levai had also, "picked an easier district," Bene thought.

¶16. (SBU) Accompanying better living standards, however, is a palpable anxiety about the future, Bene said. No new major companies had opened for business in the county in the last year, and a tobacco plant, a major employer, had closed. Hajdu-Bihar residents were watching neighboring Romania's improving economic performance with a certain trepidation.

FIDESZ Confident

¶17. (SBU) Thirty-nine year old FIDESZ MP Robert Racz was openly confident April 4 that his party would reprise its 2002 performance in 2006. (Racz is a graduate of Debrecen's university and has been active in FIDESZ politics since at least 1998. He graduated with a degree in English and history.) Poloffs met Racz at FIDESZ campaign headquarters which was humming with young campaign workers manning phone banks, and regularly leaving the office with bundles of campaign literature. Gesturing to baskets of bread, Racz said, "we even feed our campaign workers this year." Racz said that each potential FIDESZ voter would be contacted by telephone and urged to vote April 9. Those phone calls, in some cases, would be supplemented by house visits. (Racz said he had five thousand campaign workers at his command in the county. There are eight hundred actual party members in Debrecen, and three-four thousand in Hajdu-Bihar County.)

¶18. (SBU) Racz described FIDESZ's campaign tactic in the county as one of "listening, not talking." The party's door-to-door campaign had begun two years ago, he said. The information gathered had been used in drafting the party platform and in devising its campaign strategy. The party's extensive contact with the electorate had led it, Racz said, to focus on the population's sense of economic well-being. He thought that up to 80 percent of the population did not believe itself to be palpably better off than it had been four years earlier. And anyway, he added, if someone is "slightly" better off than he had been, he generally characterizes himself as poorer; "and we exploit that."

BUDAPEST 00000718 004 OF 004

¶19. (SBU) Although Hajdu-Bihar County borders Romania, the future of ethnic Hungarians abroad would not figure in the calculations of the electorate, Racz thought. "It's a dead issue," he said, even allowing he was grateful the MSZP has not held out the specter this time around of poorer ethnic Hungarians from Romania flooding Hungary under a FIDESZ government.

¶20. (SBU) Racz thought it unlikely that SZDSZ would cross the

five percent threshold to representation in Parliament.
"They were in government" for the last four years, he said,
"and are contaminated." He described Gyurcsany as only a
"semi-new" MSZP face,

¶21. (SBU) Racz was philosophical about the changes his party was undergoing as Hungary moved toward a two-party system. He agreed that FIDESZ had become more of a coalition than it had been, even having under its wing distinguishable parties like the Christian Democrats. Racz denied FIDESZ's core values had been sacrificed in its transformation. The "only core value," he said, was "opposition to having the communists in power," which continues to this day.

Comment

¶22. (SBU) As has been the case elsewhere in Hungary, Embassy was impressed with how well the FIDESZ county party apparatus functions. Its well-oiled machinery, the stellar reputation of Mayor Kosa, the lack of a county personality from another party of similar stature to challenge him, and economic uncertainty seem to have combined in Hajdu-Bihar County to give the race this time around a certain sense of inevitability. As has been the case elsewhere in Hungary, all of the campaign issues here are ultimately economic ones, and Mayor Kosa's success in making tangible improvements in Debrecen seems to have persuaded voters here that the party could replicate that feat nationally, if elected.

¶23. (U) Visit Embassy Budapest's classified website:
www.state.sgov.gov/p/eur/budapest/index.cfm
WALKER